

CALIFORNIA

OCCUPATIONAL GUIDES

TELEPHONE OPERATORS AND SWITCHBOARD OPERATORS

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WHAT DOES A TELEPHONE OPERATOR AND SWITCHBOARD OPERATOR DO?

TELEPHONE OPERATORS and SWITCHBOARD OPERATORS offer help to those seeking information over the telephone. They do this by listening to each customer, identifying needs, and translating those needs into electrical signals by operating some type of electronic console. How the Operator does this depends on the kind of system used and where the Operator works. In a telephone company, for instance, the Telephone Operator may help customers as a *Directory Assistance* or *Long Distance Operator*.

Directory Assistance Operators answer calls from customers requesting business and residential telephone numbers. They access a computer and enter the information supplied by the caller to

produce the requested phone number on the screen. These Operators may check alternate name spellings and/or listing formats when customers are uncertain or unable to give complete information. They strive to serve customers with speed and accuracy, repeating similar sequences throughout the entire shift.

Long Distance Operators handle long-distance person-to-person, collect, reverse charge, overseas, and conference calls. They may also handle calls made from public pay phones or cell phones, and give special assistance to persons such as those who are unable to dial or who are in emergency situations.

Switchboard Operators work with telephone business systems equipment or switchboards to relay incoming, outgoing, and interoffice calls, either working internally for a private or public firm or externally with an answering service. They may supply information to callers and record messages.

Telephone Operators perform the following tasks:

- Observe signal light on switchboard, plug cords into trunk-jack, and dial or press button to make connections.
- Consult charts to determine charges for pay-telephone calls.
- Insert tickets in calculagraph (time-stamping device) to record time of toll calls.
- Request coin deposits for calls.
- Calculate and quote charges on long-distance connections.
- Give information regarding subscribers' telephone numbers.
- Refer to alphabetical or geographical reels or directories to answer questions and provide telephone information.
- Plug in headphones when signal light flashes on cord switchboard, or push switch keys on cordless switchboard to make connections.
- Keep reels and directories up-to-date.
- Maintain record of calls received.

- Suggest alternate locations and spellings under which number could be listed.
- Type location and spelling of name on computer terminal keyboard, and scan directory or microfilm viewer to locate number.

Switchboard Operators perform the following tasks:

- Answer incoming calls, greet callers, provide information, transfer calls and/or take messages as necessary.
- Answer simple questions about clients' businesses, using reference files.
- Keep records of calls placed and charges incurred.
- Operate communication systems, such as telephone, switchboard, intercom, two-way radio, or public address.
- Page individuals to inform them of telephone calls, using paging and interoffice communication equipment.
- Place telephone calls or arrange conference calls as instructed.
- Record messages, suggesting rewording for clarity and conciseness.
- Relay and route written and verbal messages.
- Route emergency calls appropriately.
- Stamp messages with date and time, and file them appropriately.

WHAT SKILLS ARE IMPORTANT?

Important skills, knowledge, and abilities for Telephone Operators and Switchboard Operators include:

- Speaking – Talking to others to convey information effectively.
- Active Listening – Giving full attention to what other people are saying, taking time to understand the points being made, asking questions as appropriate, and not interrupting at inappropriate times.
- Writing – Communicating effectively in writing as appropriate for the needs of the audience.
- Service Orientation – Actively looking for ways to help people.
- Reading Comprehension – Understanding written sentences and paragraphs in work-related documents.
- English Language – Knowledge of the structure and content of the English language including the meaning and spelling of words, rules of composition, and grammar.
- Telecommunications – Knowledge of transmission, broadcasting, switching, control, and operation of telecommunications systems.
- Computers and Electronics – Knowledge of electronic equipment, and computer hardware and software.
- Clerical – Knowledge of administrative and clerical procedures and systems such as word processing, managing files and records, stenography and transcription, designing forms, and other office procedures and terminology.
- Geography – Knowledge of the locations of countries and cities.
- Perceptual Speed – The ability to quickly and accurately compare similarities and differences among sets of letters, numbers, objects, pictures, or patterns.
- Reaction Time – The ability to quickly respond (with the hand, finger, or foot) to a signal (sound, light, picture) when it appears.

WHAT'S THE WORK ENVIRONMENT?

Telephone Operators generally work in clean, well-lighted, well-ventilated areas. They may work alone or with others doing similar tasks. The work is sedentary, and the tasks are usually routine, but Operators must be able to handle stress if callers are rude and when the volume of calls are heavy.

Union Membership

The Communications Workers of America (CWA) or the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) represent Operators in some areas of the State. In shops where these unions are active, Operators pay dues and may join the union.

WHAT'S THE CALIFORNIA JOB OUTLOOK?

The following information is from the occupational projections produced by the Employment Development Department (EDD) Labor Market Information Division (LMID):

Telephone Operators

Estimated number of workers in 2002:	8,200
Estimated number of workers in 2012:	3,500
Projected Growth 2002-2012:	-57.3%
Est. openings due to separations by 2012:	2,100

These figures do not include self-employment.

Switchboard Operators, Including Answering Service

Estimated number of workers in 2002:	23,300
Estimated number of workers in 2012:	23,400
Projected Growth 2002-2012:	0.4%
Est. openings due to separations by 2012:	6,000

These figures do not include self-employment.

Neither of these occupations will enjoy healthy growth. The number of Telephone Operators will shrink. Employment growth for Switchboard Operators will come to a standstill. The combined job decrease will be 14.6 percent. Job opportunities will be due to workers leaving these jobs for other occupations and due to other sorts of separations.

Trends

As communication systems become more automated, and new touch-tone features are widely used, fewer Operators will be necessary. Voice synthesis has displaced many Operators. In private industry, computerized call handling devices replace Operator tasks. Also, many employers are opting to carry cellular telephones instead of using telephone answering services, further reducing Operator needs.

Consolidations and mergers of telephone companies will contribute to the flagging demand for Operators. As telephone technology improves and long-distance prices fall, telephone companies will consolidate Telephone Operator jobs. Operators will work at fewer locations and will serve more customers.

Hotels have reported declining revenues due to hotel patrons opting to use cell phones rather than pay the costly fees involved in making a call from a hotel room. Hospitals have also seen a decline of use of internal phone systems, eliminating the need for some Switchboard Operators.

These aspects of a growing trend are counterbalancing the overall growth rate of California industry. The result is that all of the job openings available for Operators will be those caused by the employers' need to fill behind employees who have left.

Employment of communications equipment Operators is projected to decline through 2012, largely due to new laborsaving communications technologies and to consolidation of Telephone Operator jobs into fewer locations, often staffed by personnel supply services firms. Virtually all job openings will result from the need to replace communications equipment Operators who transfer to other occupations or leave the labor force.

Developments in communications technologies, specifically the ease and accessibility of voice recognition systems, will continue to have a significant impact on the demand for communications equipment Operators. The decline in employment will be sharpest among directory assistance Operators; smaller decreases will occur for Switchboard Operators. Voice recognition technology allows automated phone systems to recognize human speech. Callers speak directly to the system, which interprets the speech and then connects the call. Because voice recognition systems do not require callers to input data on a telephone keypad, they are easier to use than touch-tone systems. The systems also can understand increasingly sophisticated vocabulary and grammatical structures; however, many companies will continue to employ Operators so that those callers having problems can access a "live" employee, if desired.

Electronic communications through the Internet or e-mail, for example, provides alternatives to telephone communications and requires no Operators. Internet directory assistance services

are reducing the need for directory assistance Operators. Local phone companies currently have the most reliable phone directory data; however, Internet services provide information such as addresses and maps, in addition to phone numbers. As telephones and computers converge, the convenience of Internet directory assistance is expected to attract many customers, reducing the need for Telephone Operators to provide this service.

WHAT DOES THE JOB PAY?

California Earnings

The following information is from the Occupational Employment Statistics Survey of Employers by EDD/LMID:

Telephone Operators 2005 Wages

Hourly wages range from	\$10.79	to	\$19.85
Average hourly wage	\$15.17		
Average annual wage	\$31,561		

These figures do not include self-employment.

Switchboard Operators, Including Answering Service 2005 Wages

Hourly wages range from	\$9.37	to	\$14.15
Average hourly wage	\$12.11		
Average annual wage	\$25,189		

These figures do not include self-employment.

Hours

Most Operators work 40 hours per week. Round-the-clock establishments, such as telephone companies, hotels, and hospitals, require Operators to work shifts, which may include weekends and holidays. Operators who have the most seniority often have first choice of shifts. Split shifts are common in telephone companies.

Benefits

Benefits include holidays and vacations, health and other insurance, and retirement plans.

HOW DO I PREPARE FOR THE JOB?

Education and Training

Many employers require or prefer six months to one year of public contact experience. A few require one year's experience as an Operator. Some employers give job-related tests and physical examinations. Employers also may be able to modify the workstation to fit those with special needs.

Licensing and Certification

Licenses or certificates are not required for Switchboard Operators and Telephone Operators.

Continuing Education

There are no formal continuing education requirements for Switchboard Operators and Telephone Operators.

HOW DO I FIND THE JOB?

Direct application to employers remains one of the most effective job search methods. Most Telephone Operators are employed in telephone companies. Switchboard Operators are employed in a wide variety of industries, including lodging and hospitality, manufacturing, health care, and business services.

Search these **yellow page** headings for listings of private firms:

- Telecommunications Carriers
- Answering Bureaus
- Hospitals
- Hotels

The following Internet resources can be helpful to the job search process:

America's Career InfoNet
www.acinet.org

America's Job Bank
www.ajb.dni.us

CalJOBSSM
www.caljobs.ca.gov

Job Search and Resume Writing
www.worksmart.ca.gov/success_tips_menu.html

Local Job Service Offices
www.edd.ca.gov/jsrep/jsloc.htm

Occupational Information Network (O*NET) Online
<http://online.onetcenter.org>

One-Stop Career Centers List
www.edd.ca.gov/ONE-STOP/pic.htm

For statewide and local projections, wages, employers by county, and other occupational information go to www.labormarketinfo.edd.ca.gov and select *Find an Occupation Profile*.

WHERE CAN THE JOB LEAD?

Promotion depends on ability, performance, and time on the job, as well as the firm's size. Generally, the larger the firm is, the more advancement opportunities there are. The trend of electronic technology replacing human Operators may cause the job seekers to want to advance beyond the Telephone Operator level. Therefore, the more clerical and office skills gained, the better the career opportunities.

OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Communications Workers of America
 Local 9000
 5855 Venice Blvd.,
 Los Angeles, CA 90019-5021
 (323) 931-9000
www.cwa-union.org

International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers
 Local Union 6
 55 Fillmore Street
 San Francisco, CA 94117
 (415) 861-5752
www.ibew6.org

RELATED OCCUPATIONAL GUIDES

Receptionists	No. 21
Adjustment Clerks	No. 562

OCCUPATIONAL CODE REFERENCES

SOC (*Standard Occupational Classification*)

Switchboard Operators, Including Answering Service	43-2011
Telephone Operators	43-2021

O*NET (*Occupational Information Network*)

Switchboard Operators, Including Answering Service	43-2011.00
Telephone Operators	43-2021.00

OES (*Occupational Employment Statistics*)

Switchboard Operators	57102
Directory Assistance Operators	57105
Central Office Operators	57108